

HOLISTIC HEALTH CARE FOR CAVALIERS

PART TWO

Improving Nutrition

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I have considered the items that have improved the health of our six generations of Cavaliers over the past twenty years and have broken it down to the following areas:

1. Limiting Vaccinations
2. Improving Nutrition
3. Stopping Suppressive Medical Treatments
4. Homeopathic or Other Holistic Modalities
5. Appropriate Supplements and Nutraceuticals

We will take each of these areas separately and in this chapter we will address the issue of proper nutrition.

I have spent almost thirty-four years in practice (as I write this) ranging from general medicine, to surgery, to holistic practice. Our current holistic modalities include Acupuncture, Herbal, Homeopathy, Chiropractic, and Nutrition. Over the years I have been asked; "If you could only do ONE thing to help your patients, what would it be?" By far, the greatest single stride one can make in the overall health of your animals is proper nutrition.

My Experience with Nutrition

In the last chapter (vaccines), I stressed that over use of vaccinations is probably the biggest item causing damage to the life force and immune system. Great nutrition is my number one modality for improving the overall health and condition of almost any patient.

In times past, when working both a surgical and part-time holistic practice, getting an appointment for a new, non-critical, patient took up to a month. In the interim, I would often suggest that clients pick up a book on raw feeding, like Richard and Susan Pitcairn's, Pat McKay's or Anitra Frazier's. They introduced their animal to raw food and when we arrived at our appointment time, many issues had resolved on their own. It was very convincing!

Remember, these were not old, critical, ill animals since I would not leap into raw feeding in those cases. In the more debilitated patient, one must be more cautious and gradual. Raw feeding can be a powerful tool to improve health but can be dangerous to a weak animal if done improperly or injudiciously. Their intestinal systems must adjust and they tend to detoxify so that needs to be monitored and closely regulated. The younger, strong, patient usually does fine with a gradual shift unless they have food allergies or IBD issues (Inflammatory Bowel Disease). So, with those warnings, we can begin to discuss the different levels of feeding and then a bit more on the raw diets.

There are, of course, many factors one must consider in evaluating the proper diet for their animal. Some of the most important include:

- Level of commitment and available resources
- Availability and cost of different foods
- Availability of the person or persons preparing the food and doing the feeding throughout the day
- **And of Course... The Current Health Status of the Patient Including Sensitivity to Foods**

The current health status of your dog (or cat, but this is a Cavalier Journal) has a great deal to do with decision-making when it comes to feeding. Unfortunately, this often distills down to a prescription dog food recommended by your veterinarian or a food advertised on television. While these foods have a certain level of balance and nutrition, they are not usually the best diet you can and should feed. However, if you are prepared to do a bit of work, some extra research, and spend some additional money up front, you and your animal can reap great benefit.

Vegetarian and Vegan Diets

We will not discuss any vegetarian diets. Though I have seen them to be successful in a very limited scope, I am convinced dogs are primarily carnivorous (though they might want to convince us otherwise with their constant desire for whatever we're eating) most do not do well on a strictly vegetarian diet. I have seen many a committed Vegan respect their animals and feed a raw meat and raw food diet. That, to me, is the ultimate sign of love for their animal companions.

Commercial Foods... A Starting Point

I usually divide commercial foods into levels of quality and effectiveness. Over the years the members of some levels did change as some foods shifted in quality or even disappeared due to economics. While not an enthusiastic supporter of dried food, I do recognize that many dogs are fed dry food. It is convenient, easy to travel with, clean and readily available. When I do get a new patient on a strictly dry food diet, one of the first things (health allowing) I do is try to expand the understanding, the comfort level and begin to add some raw food, IN MODERATION, in an attempt to expand the animal's palate and improve their physical condition.

I am a strong proponent of raw feeding and that would be my ultimate goal in almost every case. I also recognize that this takes work and commitment. However, with the advent

of many frozen raw food diets, it has become much easier to feed a well-balanced, complete raw food diet to your animal. Before we tackle more on the formidable concept of raw feeding, we shall discuss some of the other feeding options currently available.

The first is the dry food diet. I still feed it as a snack in the afternoon when we are too hectic to prepare the raw food, or forgot to defrost it as we usually feed the frozen variety out of convenience.

For those animals still getting kibble (dry food), I recommend the upper echelon brands that contain no ethoxyquin; are made from human grade component products; are baked, not cooked under high temperature and pressure as this only destroys the vitamins and nutrition in the food.

Many of these like Petguard and Flint River Ranch have been staples in my dry food pantry for decades and I am still pleased with their quality and consistency. In our practice, I see many animals on lower grade, commercial (though heavily advertised) brands and, despite the fact that they could be on something better, the younger strong ones are doing "OK".

In our holistic practice, it stands to reason that we see a high percentage of animals that are already quite ill, so we tend to shift them away from most consumer level foods as soon as we can. Fortunately, as awareness grows, we also are seeing more and more "healthy" animals whose caregivers just want the best care their animal can get in life. We almost always try to impress upon them the benefits of a balanced raw food diet over anything else in these instances.

Our Original Guide

In 1996 I developed a feeding scale based on the available foods at the time. In the fourteen years since then, some of my thoughts and experience has evolved and I have made some modifications for this chapter but the main thrust remains true. I thought it would be a good jumping off point for further discussion.

I believe that nutrition is the cornerstone of good health, and just as you can't build a house on sand, you can't build a healthy body with poor nutrition. We have therefore developed a scale of Nutritional Adequacy for feeding our animal companions. This scale is as follows, with 10 being the best and 1 being (in our opinion) the worst.

Level 1

(Poorest) an all meat diet (surprise). Remember, the dog in the wild eats everything when it kills its prey, including the intestinal contents. In a rabbit the intestinal contents amount to about 40 percent of the body weight. The dog in the wild also eats the bones, a source of calcium for its body.

Level 2

Soft-Moist diets. These diets are very high in sugars, chemicals, dyes, etc. They have labels that make interesting reading.

Level 3-4

Soft-Moist and Dry combinations. Also included in this category are the generic brands. Many generic and store brands have been incriminated in the literature for being of poor quality, and tend to vary from batch to batch.

Level 5-6

Standard commercial diets. The name brands are adequate in most cases for normal, healthy young to middle aged animals. These diets are not for the ill or aged animal with their unique

health challenges.

Level 7-8

"Top-Shelf" lines at commercial stores. These are higher quality in their ingredients, but still may have artificial preservatives, and other chemical additives. There are some natural products in this category, but often may be produced with less than optimal ingredients. There are, unfortunately, a number of other low quality products that come with high-sounding names and massive advertising budget.

I include most "Prescription" diets in this level. One can applaud the basic understanding that specific dietary formulations might help an animal with chronic illness but these are usually not complete or appropriate diets from a holistic standpoint, one should carefully examine the contents and while adequate, they are not the best you can usually do.

Level 9

Highest Level Commercial Dry and Wet Foods - In the US, I prefer Flint River Ranch (in the interest of full disclosure we have been distributors since about 1992), Petguard, Prairie and Canidae are some other products giving good results. They are usually made with "human grade" base product, use Vitamin C and Vitamin E as natural preservatives and anti-oxidants. There should be no ethoxyquin or BHT. The dry should be baked and not pressure cooked as that can convert the beneficial additives into free radicals and these toxic substances plus the lack of vitamins and anti-oxidants defeat the initial purpose.

We feel that level 9 foods are the best of the commercial dry and wet foods we have found so far. There are other good brands and their omission does not eliminate them, we just have minimal experience with them.

However, we still recommend a raw food diet, are fully aware that the time it can take to create a diet from scratch can be overwhelming depending on the complexity of the formula. We also realize that many a pet will not give up its dry food without a battle. Lack of availability and increased initial cost can be a factor and, last but not least, is the fear placed on us by the conventional veterinarian telling us "raw food is terrible for your animal and will make it sick".

That brings us to level 10

Level 10 is a raw food diet

When this scale was started fourteen years ago, the only options were to create your own home-prepared diet with fresh foods. Now, we have the added option of the many frozen, all natural, raw food diets now available. There are even dehydrated or freeze dried ones for travel and convenience of storage.

This is the best way to care for your pet and we recommend a raw food for the animals that will eat it (most love it) and I remind you that this should be done under some sort of mentor or professional guidance for animals that are weakened or suffering from long-term chronic disease.

As you can see, the core of that guide was written fourteen years ago and a lot has changed since then, we are no longer as comfortable with dry feeding and we have had the scares of melamine and other toxic components included in many commercial dry foods. Some of the brands have passed on, some still maintain the best quality and there are a lot of the bigger companies jumping on the "natural" band wagon. There are also an increased number of "Prescription" diets and online marketing has put many regional brands within the reach of many through online marketing.

Understand the TRUE Costs Involved Are More Than the Food Itself

Most of these upper level or raw commercial food (or ingredients for home preparation) are more expensive than your store bought, lower quality food. The reasons are usually the better ingredients. However, the long term savings can be extreme both in financial gain and, more importantly, in health gains. You end up with healthier pets, less medical bills and the animals even seem to eat less, so it comes out very close cost-wise!

Raw Food Formulations

There are many purists that will advocate preparation of your own special formulas, advocate for the idea of prey model diets, push for the idea of BARF (bioactive raw food) diets and their variations. There are so many websites and books dedicated to raw feeding with the many other variations and refinements on the theme and our space is limited in this excerpt. Use those resources to start exploring the almost countless websites dedicated to raw feeding. Realize that each area of raw feeding has its own true believers. You need to either judiciously sift through the material or find a trusted friend, mentor, or nutritional expert to help through the mass of information. Feeding an already prepared, frozen, raw food diet is usually the best way to start. There are many brands, but we are comfortable with Nature's Variety and Primal as the main brands we feed our Cavaliers.

Grain or no Grain:

There has been major discussion over the past decade about grain or no grain. You can go to thousands of websites and feeding lists all over the internet on this subject. It seems generally accepted that animals do not eat processed grain in the wild. One rarely sees packs of dogs grazing in the fields. However, they eat animals that do eat grain and that includes stomach contents, so the "no-grain" theory may have some gaping holes in it.

Experience has shown that grain usually does not make much of a difference in a healthy, well cared for, asymptomatic animal. I tend to move to a grain free diet in animals that are dealing with chronic conditions such as skin problems, inflammatory bowel disease, and chronic ear problems or other inflammatory issues. Usually by the time they get to see me in my practice, they are already on some sort of restricted diet and now that is no longer working (or never did). The subject of grain or no grain is too big to cover in any more detail than this but it is a major factor in discussion lists these days. You should be aware that it can have significant impact on your animals' health. My feeling is, when in doubt, leaving out the grain is safer. I have occasionally seen cases where the elimination of grain has solved long standing issues in a case so all things are possible.

Good Books on Raw Diets:

Over the years there have been a few books that have stood out as the bibles of raw feeding. There have been many written but I still refer back to these as the cornerstone of anyone choosing raw feeding for their animal. Dr. Richard and Susan Pitcairn's Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs and Cats has just come out with its third edition and is usually my number one choice. The complete selection is as follows:

- Complete Guide to Natural Health for Dogs and Cats THIRD EDITION by Richard and Susan Pitcairn.

- The New Natural Cat by Anitra Frazier
- Reigning Dogs and Cats by Pat McKay
- Cat Care, Naturally by Celeste Yarnell
- Give Your Dog a Bone - Ian Billinghurst

They are available at better book stores. Or online at Amazon.com

Other things to watch out for in Raw Feeding

If making your own – meat is not enough. Meat is high in phosphorus and oral phosphorus binds calcium in the gut. This can cause low calcium in the animal unless an appropriate calcium supplement is present. That is why many people feed ground up meat and bones or uncooked chunks of meat with bones (usually only COOKED bones splinter). Animals eat bones with their diet in the wild. Think about it!

Dogs are not prone to salmonella but people are so make sure you clean up well after preparing the food.

Beware of raw feeding in households where the animal or owner is immune compromised – chemotherapy, high levels of immune suppressants, cyclosporine and steroids can do this to people and animals so any animal on these things needs to have professional consultation before going raw. The same goes for people and I do not recommend raw feeding without supervision in active HIV situations with owners.

Go slow and stick with one protein at a time. Be sure the animal is responding well before moving onto the next protein.

Add appropriate probiotics and digestive enzymes to help with the processing.

Add vegetables if you want. I think the only vegetables that can raise issues are grapes, raisins, dates and onions (in excess). A bit of seasoning here and there has never been a problem in my practice.

In Conclusion:

Nutrition is the subject of numerous volumes and the goal of this chapter was to familiarize the reader with their options, our experience with the many types of diets and feeding protocols and to give an overview. Consider this a starting place on your journey into a new world that can do more to improve or maintain the health and vigor of your pet than anything else at our disposal. Use common sense and start simple and basic. Add to what you are doing slowly and please remember that anything this powerful can have ill effects if done too quickly, to violently or to excess.

Next time we will take on another of the subjects listed above. We will continue to discuss some of the things I have learned in thirty-four years of veterinary practice -twenty of which has been in holistic and most importantly from our six generations of Cavaliers. We currently share our home with fourteen (actually THEY share their home with us). Our oldest "Noelle" turns thirteen on Christmas Day 2010 and considering her mother Katie (our first pup) died at six and a half from congestive heart failure, we feel that our methods have helped us raise much stronger and healthier dogs. We are so looking forward to the milestone of her birthday.

Until next time, Karen and I wish you all a healthy and happy holiday and New Year.

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